



Interdisciplinary Political Studies

<http://siba-e.se.unisalento.it/index.php/idps>

ISSN: 2039-8573 (electronic version)

IdPS, Issue 3(1) 2017: 219-222

DOI: 10.1285/i20398573v3n1p219

Published in December 11, 2017

BOOK REVIEWS

Through a Glass Darkly: The Social Sciences Look at the Neoliberal University, edited by Margaret Thornton. Acton: Australian National University Press, 2014, pp. 334

Adriano Cozzolino

University of Naples L'Orientale

The 'neoliberal university' and its contestation are increasingly featuring as common topics in academic debates (Canaan & Shumar 2008; Ball 2012). Academia is itself subject matter of growing scrutiny to understand its role in the neoliberal social order – as both shaped by neoliberal policies and shaper of 'know-how' and applied knowledge for market economy. In this regard, this collective volume is a timely and welcomed enterprise to shed light on such processes affecting the Australian university system.

The book, edited and introduced by Margaret Thornton, hosts fifteen essays by scholars from a wide array of social sciences ranging from feminist studies to political theory, economics and sociology, history and law studies; and it is organized in six sections that tackles with the neoliberal university from different perspectives.

Thornton's introduction is effective in raising several critical points about the neoliberal trajectory of Australian university. First, the Author aptly stresses that

Work licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non commercial-Share alike 3.0 Italian License

within the all-encompassing dominance of neoliberal economic rationality, the social sciences and their critical role in society are mostly discarded, for universities are expected to produce know-how and applied knowledge to serve industry and markets. Second, Thornton introduces what she terms the 'users-pays' regime. Due to incremental processes of privatization of higher education, students are requested to pay higher fees, indebting themselves and turning into students-consumers interested in the economic return of their 'investment'. The third point goes straight into the core question of the neoliberal governance of universities. The Author remarks that, on the one hand, the neoliberalization of education has implied massive disinvestments and budget cuts to higher education funding. On the other, that the overall bureaucratic control over university increased as a strategy to enhance productivity and competitiveness, namely the mantra discourse of neoliberalism. Moreover, universities, caught into processes of funding cuts/restructuring, are requested to act as enterprises for attracting new investments after budget cuts. Thus, the predominance of market rationality, processes of privatization, commodification and cuts of public funding, the creation of user-payers regime, and increased bureaucratic control immediately affect social sciences and weaken their overall critical/emancipatory role in society (Slaughter & Leslie 1997; Gilde 2007; Frank & Gambler 2006).

Meaningfully, it stands out the sharp division between economists and other social scientists. This latter group's essays generally prove to have a wider breath and to be more attentive to societal dynamics as a whole - sign, on the other hand, of a still patent lack of critical reflections, by economists, of the role of economic knowledge in society.

For instance, on the side of the economists, Brennan (ch. 4) frames the problem in terms of rising bureaucracy, while Aspromourgos (ch. 5), criticizes the

managerialist governance of the university that, especially due to the ranking obsession, prompts unethical behavior. The essay of Corbett *et al* (ch. 12) stands out as the most enthusiastic of current higher education reforms, stressing the manifold possibilities concerning, for instance, funding and/or improved management capacities. Whithers (ch. 7), in a more nuanced position, advances a middle-way stance laying emphasis on the role of the university in the tertiary economy.

Critical essays outnumber the others. Among others, Forsyth (ch. 1) and Jayasuriya (ch. 6) offer two long-term critical reconstructions of the 'idea of university' and the relation between academia, knowledge and society. Jenkins (ch. 3) discusses the relation between market rationality and philosophy, while the impact of managerialism, market and consumerism on academic governance is discussed by Lindsay (ch. 9) and Thornton and Shannon (ch. 10). The essay of Kenway, Boden and Fahey (ch. 15) closes the volume on a positive tone through exemplifying cases of intellectual resistance against the despotic dyad market-bureaucracy.

In conclusion, the volume is a worth reading initiative to learn more of the current practices and governance of Australian academia and higher education. Especially the apparatus of critical essays of the volume is rich in terms of themes and perspectives, and challenges the market orthodoxy of the economic knowledge. In this regard, despite its somehow overstretched heterogeneity, the book turns to be an interesting initiative to unveil the actual neoliberal practices concerning higher education.

References

- Ball S, 2012, *Global Education Inc. New Policy Networks and The Neo-Liberal Imaginary*, London and New York, Routledge.
- Canaan, JE & Shumar, W (eds) 2008, *Structure and Agency in the Neoliberal University*, New York, Routledge.
- Frank, J & Gambler J, 2006, *Reconstructing the University. Worldwide Shifts in Academia in the 20th Century*, Stanford, Stanford University Press.
- Gilde, C (ed) 2007, *Higher Education: Open For Business*, Plymouth, Lexington Books.
- Slaughter, S & Leslie, LL 1997, *Academic Capitalism: Politics, Policies and the Entrepreneurial University*, New York, Johns Hopkins University Press.

Adriano Cozzolino